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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the process of giving interpersonal feedback in two continuing human relations groups to determine (1) the proportion of feedback perceived as useful for personal and interpersonal development, (2) the relationship between giving feedback that is perceived as useful and receiving that feedback, and (3) the relationship between measures of self-actualization/ extroversion/neuroticism and the giving of feedback perceived to be useful. Subjects, 33 members of two different university human relations groups, met in their groups three times a week over a seven-week period. During the first group meeting, each subject completed personality inventories, measuring extroversion-introversion and neuroticism. During each of the remaining sessions, a facilitator gathered data using an interpersonal feedback form especially prepared for the study consisting of six sets of scales that rated feedback as either beneficial or harmful, useful or useless, or valuable or worthless. Throughout the study, they also completed weekend reflection forms, with similar scales, to gauge whether their evaluations had changed with reflection. Results showed that approximately 90% of the received feedback was perceived as beneficial, useful, and valuable. There was a positive relationship between the giving and receiving of useful feedback, and extroversion, neuroticism, and self-actualization scores were not found to be related to the giving of useful feedback. (FL)

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An Investigation of the Giving and Receiving of Interpersonal Feedback Within the Human Relations Group

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Abstract

Approximately 90% of the received feedback in the human relations groups studied was in the "beneficial-useful-valuable" range, with 5% in the "harmful-useless-worthless" range. There was a positive relationship between the giving and receiving of useful feedback. Extraversion, neuroticism, and POI "self-actualization" scores were not found to be related to the giving of useful feedback. There was a positive relationship between POI Inner-Direction scores (and certain subscale scores) and the perception of the group as a personal source of useful feedback.

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The internal processes of intensive experiential learning groups (i.e., human relations groups, laboratory learning groups, encounter groups, sensitivity training groups, T-groups) have been examined far less attentively than the effects of various group interventions upon group outcomes (Fisher and Werbel, 1979). Yet there is much that is fascinating about the intragroup dynamics of intensive learning groups (McGrath and Kravitz, 1982).

The aim of the present investigations is to explore the process of interpersonal feedback-giving in the context of two ongoing human relations groups. Feedback is defined here as information from person A that allows person B to know how person A is perceiving, and/or feeling about, the behavior of person B. Of specific interest are the following questions, relating to the giving of feedback that is perceived by the feedback receiver as being <u>useful</u>:

1. What proportion of the feedback received in the experiential human relations group is perceived as being useful for personal and interpersonal development?

2. Is there a relationship between <u>giving</u> feedback that is perceived as being useful and <u>receiving</u> feedback that is seen as being useful?

3. Is there a relationship between measures of self-actualization/extraversion/neuroticism and the giving of feedback that is perceived as being useful?

The first research question entails obtaining a ratio for each group comparing received feedback that is seen to be useful, with received feedback that is seen to be counter-productive to personal and interpersonal development. Campbell and Dunnette (1968) pointed out long ago that one of the major assumptions behind the experiential learning group is that group members can produce articulate and constructive feedback. The author knows of no group norms in the literature that address this assumption.

The second research question is related to Jourard's (1971) notion of the "dyadic effect," which states that self-disclosure begets self-disclosure. After more than fifty studies of this hypothesis, the research generally indicates that there is a relationship between the self-disclosure of communicators A and B (Dindia, 1982). The vast majority of these studies, however, have involved strangers, usually in dyads, interacting under controlled conditions, and usually on a single occasion. The present inquiry, by contrast, considers the relationship between self-disclosure input-output in two ongoing human relations groups, in which the group members come to know one another over a period of seven weeks. Additionally, a specific subset of self-disclosing communication behavior is being examined that is usually not measured in self-disclosure research: interpersonal feedback.

The third research question is an effort to probe yet another little-explored research area, that concerning the relationship between personality and useful feedback-giving in the group setting.

Method

The Interpersonal Feedback Form

The first task was to develop a brief instrument for measuring the usefulness of interpersonal feedback, as perceived by the feedback receiver. The procedure used was adapted from a method developed by Darnell (1970) for determining the evaluative capacity and polarity of semantic differential scales for selected concepts. Members of two university human relations groups (N=36) were asked to indicate at what points on a series of seven-point bipolar scales the "most facilitative" and the "least facilitative" interpersonal feedback would be expected to fall. It was suggested to the respondents that "facilitative" feedback be considered as that which would be most useful for "self-exploration" and "personal and interpersonal development" for the receiver, and to the emergence of "dialogue and understanding" between the source of the feedback and the receiver. Each respondent made such judgments on a total of 20 bipolar scales. There was antecedent plausibility for the inclusion of each of these seven-point scales in a feedback response instrument.

Table 1 summarizes the obtained data.

[Table 1 goes about here]

Seven scales with discrimination percentages of 90% and above emerged. It is interesting to note the lack of discrimination abilities of the "positive-negative," "safe-dangerous," "kind-cruel," "good-bad," and "pleasurable-painful" scales for the concept "facilitative interpersonal feedback." This is in accordance with the observation on concept/scale interaction made by Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum (1957, p. 180): "What is good depends heavily on the concept being judged--strong may be good in judging athletes and politicians, but not in judging paintings and symphonies; harmonious may be good in judging organized process like family life, symphony, and hospital, but not so much in judging people or objects."

In order to obtain test-retest stability data for the seven preliminary scales, respondents were asked to listen to five one-minute tape-recorded feedback presentations, and, after each, to use the orignial 20-scale form to rate these feedback episodes. A week later respondents again rated these feedback samples. From the seven preliminary scales in Table 1 with high discrimination percentages, those selected as the most stable were "beneficial-harmful," "useful-useless," and "valuable-worthless." Approximately 90% of the respondents who rated a feedback episode as "beneficial-useful-valuable" at time #1 again did so at time #2 (while the "therapeutic-topic" or "genuine-inauthentic" scales, for example, both had 77% stability). For brevity, the acronym BUV will be used to refer to the "beneficial-harmful," "useful-useless," "valuable-worthless" scales in the remainder of this paper.

The next task was to package the BUV scales in the form of an instrument with appropriate definition and instructions for use. Briefly, six sets of BUV scales constitute the Interpersonal Feedback Form. On this form the group

member is asked to identify those "pieces of feedback" which she/he received during a group session which "stand out in your mind; that is, those pieces of feedback which had an impact of some sort on you, be it 'favorable' or 'unfavorable'." "Feedback" was defined as information from person A to person B about how person A is perceiving and/or being affected by person B's behavior. A "piece" of feedback was defined for the group members as follows: one feedback theme + one feedback-giver = one piece of feedback. One "piece" of feedback could last for a few seconds or for several minutes, using this definition.

The receiver is requested to name the giver of the feedback, and to rate it on the BUV scales. Some prescriptiveness of scale usage has accompanied the presentation of the form in the instruction that feedback is probably "beneficial, useful and valuable" if it results in responsible self-exlporation on the part of the receiver, if it is conducive to responsible dialogue and increased understanding between the giver and receiver, and if it creates a climate in which constructive behavior change (or maintenance) is given impetus.

A Weekend Reflection Form was composed of six sets of BUV scales and instructions that direct the respondent to re-rate any feedback that she/he received during the week that, upon reflection, has changed in value.

The BUV scales (combined into the Interpersonal Feedback Form) were used to generate data directly relating to all three of the research questions posed in this study.

Personality Measures

Two instruments were used to investigate research question #3: the Eysenck Personality Inventory (Eysenck, 1968), and Shostrom's Personal Orientation Inventory (Shostrom, 1968). The EPI consists of 57 items, resulting in scores on the dimensions of Introversion-Extraversion and Neuroticism. The POI consists of 150 items, resulting in one major Inner-Direction score and ten sub-scale scores. The EPI and POI are two of the more frequently used measures in research on interpersonal behavior.

Research Context

The participants in this study were the members of two university human relations groups, earning three units of upper-division credit under the course title "Human Relations in Group Interaction." Group A was composed of 17 members and group B of 16 members, all voluntarily enrolled and representing a wide-range of major fields of study.

The groups met over a seven-week period, three sessions per week, an hour and fifty minutes per session, for a total of 21 sessions. The laboratory learning model presented by Egan (1973) most closely describes the activities of the members of these groups, with self-disclosure, listening, support, and confrontation constituting the core interactions, under the guidance of the group facilitator. Although there were a half-dozen nonverbal exercises undertaken by the groups, the primary activity was group discussions of interpersonal issues. Group meetings would usually begin with silence or "small talk," and progress to more intimate levels of dialogue and disclosure, including the explicit processing of group dynamics and the sharing of interpersonal feedback.

Procedure

The EPI and POI measures were completed at the first group session. At the next group meeting members were told that their facilitator would be collecting data from them at each and every group meeting, during the final five minutes of the session, via the Interpersonal Feedback Form (consisting of six sets of BUV scales). The group members were assured they were not being manipulated, and that they were being enlisted more as co-researchers than as "objects" of study. They were acquainted with the BUV scales and the definitions entailed in using the IFF. The Weekend Reflection Form was explained. Members were assured that no one other than their facilitator would have access to the forms they completed at the conclusion of each group session. For several sessions the facilitator reiterated what he meant by "feedback," and how he was asking the group members to use the Interpersonal Feedback Form to rate the feedback they had received that session that had made some sort of impact upon them. Reassurances of privacy were made.

In addition to the session-by-session collection of BUV feedback data, at the final group session in the life of the group all members were asked to rate every other group member on the BUV scales as to how useful that member had been as a feedback-giver over the duration of the group. These ratings were averaged to obtain a single BUV score between 1.0 and 7.0 for each group member, to be referred to as "global perception-by-peers."

Members were also asked to rate themselves at the final session on the BUV scales, representing their own assessment of their feedback-giving over the entire life of the group, to be referred to as "global self-perception" of feedback-giving.

Data Analysis

For research question #1 data analysis consisted of determining the total proportion of impactful received feedback that was seen as being "beneficial-useful-valuable" versus the proportion seen as "harmful-useless-worthless," using the session-by-session BUV ratings over the life of the group.

Data on research question #2 was analyzed by correlating (Pearson 'r') number of pieces of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedback given with the number received, using session-by-session data obtained over the life of the group. Additionally, end-of-group global perception-by-peers and global self-perception ratings were examined for degree of correlation with number of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedbacks received session-by-session over the life of the group.

The third research question, relating feedback-giving to personality measures, was investigated by correlating EPI and POI scores with session-by-session BUV data, global perception-by-peers ratings, and global self-perception ratings.

Results

Research Question #1: Feedback Norms

Of all the feedback listed as "standing out" to the receivers in group A, 95% was in the "beneficial-useful-valuable" direction, and the other 5% was in

the "harmful-useless-worthless" direction (total feedback N = 394); one-quarter of the feedback in this latter category moved into neutrality or into the "beneficial-useful-valuable" range when reflected upon, as re-rated on the Weekend Reflection Sheet. None of the "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedback shifted into the non-facilitative range.

Of the feedback which was identified as having an impact in group B, 88% was in the "beneficial-useful-valuable" range, 7% in the neutral area, and 4% in the "harmful-useless-worthless" range (total feedback N = 248). On the Weekend Reflection Sheet 10% of the "harmful-useless-worthless" feedback moved into the neutral or "beneficial-useful-valuable" areas, while no shifts occurred in the other direction.

In neither group A nor group B did any one person indicate receiving more than two pieces of "harmful-useless-worthless" feedback, nor was any giver associated with the initiation of more than two such feedbacks. In both groups the facilitator was seen as giving the largest number of useful feedbacks.

Research Question #2: Feedback Output-Input

The number of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedbacks given, session-by-session, were related to the number of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedbacks received, $r = .66$ in group A, and $r = .67$ in group B, both $p < .01$.

The end-of-group global perception-by-peers ratings were also related to number of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedbacks received by feedback-givers, $r = .62$ in group A and $r = .70$ in group B, both $p < .01$. In other words, the more that members were seen as being useful feedback-givers, via a single gestalt rating, the more likely they were to perceive themselves as receiving useful feedback from other group members, session-by-session.

The end-of-group global self-perception feedback ratings were also correlated with the number of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedbacks received, $r = .48$ in group A, $p < .05$, and $r = .70$ in group B, $p < .01$. There was a positive relationship between seeing oneself as a giver of useful feedback in the group and the extent to which members saw themselves receiving useful feedback from the group, session-by-session.

It should be noted here that there was a positive relationship between end-of-group global perception-by-peers of members' usefulness as feedback-givers and the number of BUV feedbacks given session-by-session, $r = .78$ in group A, $p < .001$, and $r = .64$ in group B, $p < .01$. The end-of-group global self-perceptions were not correlated as highly with session-by-session feedback-giving, $r = .55$ in group A, $p < .05$, and $r = .36$ in group B, $p < .20$.

Research Question #3: Personality and Feedback-Giving

In neither group A nor B was there a significant correlation (all $p > .10$) between pre-group EPI or POI scores and usefulness of feedback-giving, whether measured by session-by-session feedback, global perception-by-peers, or global self-perception.

Although no research questions had been initially raised relating personality orientation to feedback perception, some interesting findings

emerged that should be reported. In group A (and group A alone, unfortunately), group members had been asked at the final session to not only rate each member of the group on the post-group BUV scales (i.e., perception-by-peers ratings), but to also use a single set of BUV scales to rate the group-as-a-whole as to how personally useful it had been to the rater as a source of feedback over the life of the group. These ratings were found to be related to the following POI dimensions: Inner-Direction, $r = .56$; Existentiality, $r = .57$; Feeling Reactivity, $r = .51$; Acceptance of Aggression, $r = .53$; Capacity for Intimate Contact, $r = .66$. All of these correlations are significant, $p < .05$, with 15 degrees of freedom. The Self-Acceptance correlation approached significance, $r = .43$, $p < .10$. In sum, the greater the degree of POI-measured "self-actualization" of the receiver, the more the group tended to be seen as a source of "beneficial-useful-valuable" information for the personal use of the feedback receiver.

Discussion

The feedback that was received by the members of the two human relations groups in the present study was overwhelmingly viewed as being within the "beneficial-useful valuable" range, according to the reports of these feedback receivers. In group A, 95% of the significant feedback received was interpreted this way, while 5% was viewed as "harmful-useless-worthless." In group B these respective percentages were 88% and 4%, with 4% rated as neutral. This would suggest that the feedback generated by the group members was generally articulate and constructive, in this case supporting one of the more crucial assumptions underlying laboratory learning group methods.

As for the relationship between feedback input-output, the findings are consistent with the research on the "dyadic effect" in self-disclosing communication in general: those who received the largest number of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedbacks were also those who gave the largest number (both groups), were likely to be rated as useful feedback-givers by other group members (both groups), and were likely to view themselves as givers of useful feedback (both groups). The intimate relationship between verbal sharing and receiving seemingly holds not only for the self-disclosure of personal interests, personal history, beliefs, etc., among strangers under contrived conditions, but also for the sharing of interpersonal feedback within the context of the ongoing human relations group.

The finding that session-by-session feedback-giving was significantly correlated with end-of-group global peer-ratings of usefulness of member feedback-giving is suggestive. One of the implications might be for the grading of university laboratory learning group members. There would seem to be some support for the use of a post-group peer-rating indicating the extent to which members have been seen by their peers as sources of useful feedback in the group.

The lack of a relationship between EPI and POI scores and the giving of useful feedback does little to clarify the personality characteristics of the givers of useful feedback. It should be noted, however, that all of the group members except one received global feedback-ratings from their peers that were in the "beneficial-useful-valuable" range. It might be that there was not enough heterogeneity in the groups studied here for relationships between feedback-giving and personality to appear, especially considering the sample sizes.

The interesting personality variable finding, however, was that while personality and feedback-giving did not yield a significant relationship, personality and feedback perception did. There was a positive relationship between the major POI Inner-Direction dimension (and certain POI subscales) and the perception of the group-as-a-whole as a source of "beneficial-useful-valuable" personal feedback. These data can be taken to imply that the degree of "self-actualization" of the receiver exerts an influence in determining how she/he evaluates the act of receiving interpersonal feedback. Since these data are correlational, however, a possible alternative interpretation is that those persons relatively fully-functioning are likely to receive interpersonal feedback that is in reality more "beneficial-useful-valuable" than that given to other members. This interpretation is rendered less plausible, however, by the fact that none of the POI dimensions correlated significantly with the number of PHFs received during the group sessions. All significant correlations were between personality and end-of-group reflection on the feedback personally received during the life of the group. This suggests that personality orientation affects the eventual feedback synthesis. This finding is provocative, and calls for further examination.

Summary

This study was an attempt to explore the giving and receiving of interpersonal feedback within the context of the human relations group. Certain facets of these intragroup interpersonal communication behaviors have been illumined: (1) Scales such as "positive-negative," "safe-dangerous," "kind-cruel," "good-bad," and "pleasurable-painful" are not valid discriminators between facilitative and non-facilitative feedback. Of greater use are these scales: "beneficial-harmful," "useful-useless," and "valuable-worthless;" (2) Approximately 90% of the received feedback in the human relations groups studied here was in the "beneficial-useful-valuable" range, with 5% in the "harmful-useless-worthless" range; (3) No one group member received or gave more than two "harmful-useless-worthless" feedbacks; (4) The facilitator was perceived as giving the largest number of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedbacks in both groups; (5) There was a positive relationship between the giving and receiving of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedback; (6) Global peer ratings of members' "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedback-giving behavior correlated with session-by-session ratings of usefulness; (7) Scores on measures of extraversion, neuroticism, and "self-actualization" were not shown to be related to the giving of useful feedback; (8) There was a positive relationship between certain POI "self-actualization" scores and the perception of the group as a personal source of "beneficial-useful-valuable" feedback.

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TABLE 1

EVALUATIVE DISCRIMINATION CAPACITIES OF SELECTED SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL SCALES FOR THE CONCEPT "FACILITATIVE INTERPERSONAL FEEDBACK" (N=36)

Scale**	(A) Scale Does Not Discriminate	(B) First Adjective Applies to "Facilitive Interpersonal Feedback"*	(C) Second Adjective Applies to "Facilitative Interpersonal Feedback"
1. pleasant-unpleasant	62%	11%	27%
2. useful-useless	3%	97%	0%
3. positive-negative	49%	35%	16%
4. helpful-obstructive	8%	92%	0%
5. non-evaluative-evaluative	22%	11%	67%
6. constructive-destructive	19%	81%	0%
7. strong-weak	11%	89%	0%
8. productive-destructive	20%	80%	0%
9. therapeutic-toxic	5%	92%	3%
10. helpful-harmful	6%	94%	0%
11. safe-dangerous	47%	20%	33%
12. kind-cruel	49%	43%	8%
13. good-bad	42%	58%	0%
14. valuable-worthless	0%	100%	0%
15. beneficial-harmful	9%	91%	0%
16. pleasurable-painful	70%	6%	24%
17. genuine-inauthentic	3%	97%	0%
18. confrontational-non-confrontational	19%	78%	3%
19. empathic-non-empathic	19%	81%	0%
20. warm-cold	30%	67%	3%

*The question being asked here is "Does this given scale enable you, the respondent, to decide whether a given piece of feedback is 'facilitative', as defined on the instruction sheet?"

**In actual presentation the scale polarities below were often in reversed order.